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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic and on the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted in compliance with the request of the Security Council contained in the presidential statement dated 26 September 2001 (S/PRST/2001/25), in which the Council requested me to keep it regularly informed of the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (BONUCA) in that country. The report covers the period from January to June 2008 and focuses mainly on political, security, socio-economic, humanitarian and human rights developments during that period.

II. Political situation

2. Since my previous report, dated 5 December 2007 (S/2007/697), the political situation has continued to be dominated by intensified preparations for the inclusive political dialogue aimed at ending the recurrent political and security crises in the country. The Dialogue Preparatory Committee, established by Presidential Decree of 30 November 2007, has completed its work and, on 25 April 2008, submitted its report, containing specifications on the organization of the dialogue, to President François Bozizé. In line with the Committee's recommendations, President Bozizé, on 8 June, set up a 15-member committee to help organize the dialogue, in particular by mobilizing financial and material resources.

3. Facilitated by BONUCA and the International Organization of la Francophonie, and presided by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Dialogue Preparatory Committee brought together the country's main political, social and rebel groups for substantive discussions on three main themes concerning (a) political and governance issues, (b) the security situation and politico-military groups, and (c) socio-economic development.

4. In its report, the Preparatory Committee recommended that the inclusive political dialogue be held in Bangui, should security be assured and judicial guarantees accorded to allow certain participants to travel to that city without fear of

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being detained. It further recommended a total number of 150 participants and a maximum duration of 17 days for the dialogue itself.

5. The work of the Preparatory Committee has set in motion a number of reconciliatory processes. In that context, on 9 May, the Government of the Central African Republic concluded a peace agreement with the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie (APRD) rebel movement, which was the last of the country's three major rebel groups to sign a peace agreement with the Government. The agreement, signed in Libreville, under the auspices of President Omar Bongo Ondimba of Gabon, provides for an immediate cessation of hostilities, the cantonment of APRD fighters in their current positions, the rehabilitation of conflict-affected areas of the country and the creation of security conditions for the holding of the inclusive political dialogue. It also foresees the adoption of a general amnesty law. My Special Representative in the Central African Republic, François Lonseny Fall, in his continuing efforts to facilitate preparations for the dialogue, had met with the APRD leadership in February in the north-western town of Paoua, to persuade APRD to participate in the Preparatory Committee. The signing of the agreement with APRD was the first step in the implementation of commitments undertaken by President Bozizé during the working visit of the Preparatory Committee to Libreville on 22 and 23 April. The other commitments include the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement with all the country's rebel groups and the adoption of appropriate judicial and legislative measures to facilitate the participation of all national stakeholders in the dialogue.

6. Members of the Preparatory Committee have also visited France, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Togo and the north-western town of Paoua in the Central African Republic, where Government troops and rebels have fought each other since 2005. They met with the leader of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi, former President Ange-Félix Patassé, former Prime Minister Martin Ziguélé, former Defence Minister Jean-Jacques Demafouth, the leader of the Forces républicaines nouvelles, Christophe Gazambéti, the coordinator of the signatories to the Manifesto for an Inclusive Political Dialogue, Nganatoua Goungaye Wanfiyo, the leader of the Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (FDPC), Abdoulaye Miskine, and APRD spokesman Laurent Djim Woi. President Bozizé participated in the missions to Gabon and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

7. In view of the critical role played by the subregional States and institutions as well as the Central African Republic's main external partners in contributing to the stabilization of the country, my Special Representative continued to consult closely with the Committee of External Partners, based in Bangui, and with the leadership of the subregional peacekeeping force for the Central African Republic, (Multinational Force of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (FOMUC)). He also visited Cameroon in February 2008, where he encouraged the Government to continue to play a major role in the peace process in the Central African Republic, including through the contribution of troops to FOMUC. Subsequently, in May 2008, the Government of Cameroon deployed a 120-strong contingent to Bangui as part of the Force.

8. From 4 to 6 February 2008, a three-day training workshop on dialogue and negotiation was organized in Bangui for members of the Dialogue Preparatory Committee. The workshop, facilitated by BONUCA, was led by the Mediation Support Unit of the Department of Political Affairs in the Secretariat, in cooperation

with a Swiss non-governmental organization, Swisspeace. It contributed significantly to the ability of the Preparatory Committee to work as a group in addressing matters crucial for stabilization of their country.

9. During the reporting period, BONUCA facilitated the establishment of the operations of the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCAT) in that country. To that end, the Support Office facilitated the finalization of a status-of-mission agreement between MINURCAT and the Government of the Central African Republic, and provides office space and other logistical support for the deployment of a small team of MINURCAT personnel in Bangui. A joint Government, BONUCA and MINURCAT mission visited Birao in the Vakaga region on 3 May 2008.

III. Military and security situation

10. The security situation continues to be relatively stable in Bangui, despite isolated cases of criminal activity. Elsewhere in the country, in spite of localized clashes, the period under review was characterized by a decrease in the intensity of conflict between Government forces and rebel groups in the north of the country. However, acts of indiscipline and lawlessness among defence and security forces, especially in their relations with the general population, have continued to increase.

11. In order to improve discipline within the defence forces and curb impunity, the Permanent Military Tribunal in Bangui heard 24 cases in March 2008 and imposed heavy sentences against culprits. The military authorities have also recently taken measures to remove illegal checkpoints on major road networks and within Bangui.

12. The security situation has improved significantly in the north-eastern provinces of Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran since the deployment, in March 2008, of the European Union Force and following the peace agreement signed between the Government and the rebel group Union des forces démocratiques pour le resemblement in April 2007. There are, however, serious risks of confrontation, as the tension brewing among the various clans within UFDR has forced one of its leaders, Zacharia Damane, to temporarily relocate to the town of Bria in eastern Central African Republic.

13. A new zone of tension has emerged in the south-east of the country, where armed elements, believed to be renegades from Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), have reportedly infiltrated into that part of the Central African Republic in close proximity to their bases in southern Sudan. Despite efforts by the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) to counter the LRA infiltration, attempts that have been undermined by the operational and logistical limitations of FACA, the LRA elements are reported to have continued to operate relatively unfettered inside the Central African Republic, burning and vandalizing villages and stealing goods and property (see also paras. 30 and 31 below).

14. Furthermore, increased activities by highway bandits, *zaraguinas*, mainly in the north-western provinces of Ouham, Ouham-Pendé and Nana-Grébizi, have resulted in the emergence of self-defence vigilante groups which no longer hesitate to openly confront the bandits.

15. Another new security phenomenon is the emergence of well-armed and equipped poachers in the Vakaga and Haute-Kotto prefectures, who have reportedly

been extending their scope of criminal activities to the central and south-eastern parts of the country, with the attendant risks of confrontations with rebels and/or *zaraguinas*. On 16 April, the poachers clashed with UFDR elements in the Haute-Kotto locality of Yalinga.

16. Overall political and operational command for FOMUC is scheduled to be transferred from the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa to the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) as of 1 July, pursuant to the decision of the ECCAS Council of Ministers taken at its meeting in Libreville, on 25 and 26 February. Deployed mainly in the north-west of the country, in Bozum, Kaga-Bandoro and more recently in Paoua, FOMUC has been expanding its presence on the ground, especially with the recent arrival of an additional 120-strong contingent from Cameroon.

17. During the period under review, two separate teams of 60 elements each of the Presidential Guard were sent to South Africa and the Sudan for training under bilateral training agreements. That is in addition to the ongoing training provided to the Presidential Guard by a South African training team in Bangui and Bouar. Cadets from the Ecole spéciale de formation des officiers d'active have also received training in Gabon and South Africa.

18. Also during the period under review, BONUCA organized a month-long training course for 25 immigration personnel. The Support Office is preparing other training workshops for the police and gendarmerie focusing on investigation techniques and professional conduct. Moreover, it provided technical support in the drafting of a law on the special status of police personnel in the Central African Republic. The law was adopted by the National Assembly on 6 May 2008.

IV. Socio-economic and financial situation

19. Various socio-professional groups, in particular public sector workers and university lecturers, continued to organize protracted labour strikes during the reporting period, complaining mainly about their unpaid salary arrears.

20. In part because of its inability to address the grievances of the striking workers, the Government of Prime Minister Élie Doté resigned on 18 January 2008, following the threat of a motion of no confidence against it in the National Assembly. Prime Minister Doté was subsequently replaced on 22 January 2008 by Faustin-Archange Touadera, the Dean of the University of Bangui, a technocrat with no prior political experience. The new Prime Minister has paid three months of salary arrears, but most of the other demands of the unions are yet to be met.

21. In spite of the grim crisis, the country's overall economic prospects continued to improve, recording steady growth of around 4.2 per cent for 2007. That increase is attributable to domestic consumer dynamism engendered by the increased availability of household income resulting from more regular payment of salaries to civil servants and State employees.

22. Prices remained generally stable, with an annual inflation rate of less than 1 per cent over 2007. Price stabilization came in the wake of a relatively high inflation rate in 2006. The brighter economic picture was also helped by the payment of arrears to cotton farmers and by the revival of activities in secondary and tertiary business sectors. Public revenue increased by over 14 per cent following

reforms to streamline the revenue collection. As a result, the State, in 2007, mobilized revenue amounting to US$ 199 million, compared to $174.8 million in 2006.

23. The World Bank and the African Development Bank have launched a midterm review of their biennial programmes with the Government, which should usher in the creation of a new support programme for the biennium 2010-2011. In the same vein, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) has selected the Central African Republic as one of the beneficiaries of its special assistance programme for conflict-affected countries. In that regard and in consonance with its new intervention strategy in the country, IFC intends to open an office in Bangui with a view to facilitating direct investments.

24. The improving economy has also enabled the Government to reduce its budgetary deficit, which is expected to drop to $38.8 million in 2008. During the same period, inflation is expected to be contained at less than 3 per cent, slightly higher than in 2007. Such projections would, to a large extent, depend on the implementation of the poverty reduction strategy paper, adopted in September 2007 by the Government and its development partners, and the materialization of donor pledges, which are critical factors for the recovery of the national economy and for the support of the Central African authorities to pursue ongoing reforms with a view to reaching decision point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative by September 2009.

25. On 8 January, I announced the eligibility of the Central African Republic to benefit from the Peacebuilding Fund. In that context, the United Nations assisted national authorities in developing a priority plan, especially during visits to Bangui in May 2008 by the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, Carolyn McAskie, and members of her staff, who discussed the Fund's assistance with the President, Prime Minister and other stakeholders.

V. Humanitarian situation and operational activities in support of development

26. The majority of the population in north-western and north-eastern Central African Republic continue to live in fear and insecurity owing to the activities of Government armed forces, rebel groups and criminal gangs. Crime has also become a major impediment to social and economic stability, engendering massive population displacements and inhibiting the free movement of persons and humanitarian operations.

27. The regions of Bouar, Bozoum, Baboua, Baoro and Bocaranga in the north-west and Kabo in the north-centre remain the most affected by the activities of *zaraguinas*, with most of the local population fleeing their villages to seek refuge in urban areas. It is estimated that a third of some 100,000 refugees and internally displaced persons have fled their homes owing to organized banditry rather than political conflict between the Government and rebel groups.

28. Humanitarian access largely hinges on the nature of relations between the Government and rebel groups. Access improved after the Government signed an agreement with APRD, but humanitarian assistance had to be suspended on at least

two occasions in April, when clashes erupted between Government forces and APRD elements around the localities of Paoua and Ndim.

29. Approximately 14,000 new refugees were reported during the period under review, with most of them registered by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Maya, in the south of Chad. Many of them were said to be fleeing atrocities, including summary executions and the burning of villages by armed groups. Clashes that reportedly erupted in April between feuding factions of UFDR triggered further population displacements between the Gordil, Boromata and Tiringoulou localities. On 10 March 2008, a woman accompanying her child in an ambulance operated by the humanitarian group, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Holland), was shot and killed. That resulted in a countrywide suspension of mobile clinics by all branches of the group.

30. Following violent attacks against the relatively peaceful south-eastern region in February and early March 2008, reportedly by LRA infiltrators, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs organized a joint assessment mission from 22 to 25 March, with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), BONUCA and the Department of Safety and Security security and protection officers. The mission assessed the security and human rights situation on the ground as well as the status of protection of civilians.

31. The mission reported that hundreds of houses and granaries had been looted, including two health-care posts. Villagers, including young boys and girls, had been abducted. According to the victims interviewed, abducted women and children were reportedly used as porters, labourers, soldiers and, in the case of girls, sex slaves. The United Nations joint mission recommended urgent concerted efforts by all actors, including United Nations agencies and the Government, to prevent further human rights abuses, especially against women and children.

32. The plight of children caught up in the country's recurrent conflicts is disturbing. In that context, my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict visited the Central African Republic from 27 to 31 May to discuss the issue with the Government and the APRD and UFDR leaders. Following those meetings, APRD and UFDR agreed to release all children participating in their movements for eventual reintegration in communities.

33. Despite the growing needs, funding for humanitarian actions in the Central African Republic remains a major concern, with response to the consolidated appeal process standing at only 31 per cent. Programmes in agriculture, education, shelter and non-food items, health, water and sanitation and protection against human rights violations, are seriously underfunded.

34. In the area of governance and crisis prevention, the United Nations Development Programme supported the Government in organizing a national seminar on security sector reform in Bangui from 14 to 17 April. The seminar, which was based on new Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development criteria on security sector reform, was the first of its kind organized in Africa. It brought together 150 participants from security services, the justice sector, the Government, the National Assembly, civil society and international partners, and resulted in the formulation of a two-year integrated action plan of concrete measures which the Government has undertaken to implement, with support from its bilateral and international partners.

35. In the area of food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations implemented a market gardening programme which significantly improved the nutritional quality of foodstuffs consumed by segments of the population, especially in conflict-affected areas. Meanwhile, plans are afoot to distribute about 700 tons of seeds for food crops to target populations in time for the 2008 farming season. Apart from its activities in conflict zones, the World Food Programme provided food support to orphans and vulnerable children as well as to persons affected by HIV/AIDS.

36. In the health sector, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund provided support to the authorities to deal with outbreaks of meningitis in the Kaga-Bandoro sub-prefecture, yellow fever in Bozoum, in the Ouham-Pendé prefecture, and an isolated case of wild polio in Bangui. Those organizations also jointly sponsored national campaigns against maternal and neonatal tetanus, and launched a national preventive campaign against poliomyelitis. They also aided the Public Health Ministry in the organization of a forum on access to health care for pregnant women and children.

37. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF also provided assistance in the education sector, including support under the UNESCO Fast-Track Initiative, for vital educational reforms. UNICEF distributed textbooks and other educational supplies in the north of the country and trained 256 teachers in Ndélé, Birao and Bria in preparation for the reopening of schools in those areas, formerly severely affected by violent conflicts.

38. BONUCA, in partnership with a local radio station, Radio Ndeke Luka, continued to provide civic education training, promoting the ideals of peace. That effort is in addition to the monthly radio programme highlighting the main activities of the mission. BONUCA also provided financial support for the organization of a refresher training course for 20 Government journalists and reporters to enhance the quality of service delivery. In addition, it has been working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and National Reconciliation in promoting democratic values and fundamental rights and freedoms.

VI. Human rights situation

39. The overall human rights situation during the reporting period continued to be a source of concern because of numerous violations, including violations of the right to life, physical integrity and due process. That situation is further compounded by the fragile security situation owing, in particular, to the activities of *zaraguinas*.

40. Reports continued to be received of violations perpetrated by defence and security forces during operations to deal with attacks by armed groups. Conflict-ridden areas, such as Ouham and Ouham-Pendé prefectures, are characterized by the absence of the rule of law, with constant reports of the use of excessive force by Government armed forces, resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. While Government forces have ceased burning villages in the north-west and centre-west, reports still persist of some elements of the Presidential Guard resorting to summary executions or arbitrary arrests to deal with persons suspected of being sympathetic to the rebellion or highway bandits. All those crimes remain unpunished owing to the lack of political will to prosecute alleged perpetrators, thus perpetuating a climate of impunity.

41. Weaknesses within the judiciary, characterized by delays in judicial proceedings, have also been a contributory factor to violations of the rights to defence and fair trial. The penitentiary system is overburdened by arbitrary arrests and detentions of suspects beyond the statutory period. Sanitary conditions in prisons and other detention facilities severely contravene minimum standards, including lack of access to sufficient food and basic health care.

42. The Government's decision to authorize the visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, from 31 January to 7 February 2008, was seen as a strong sign of its determination to begin to foster improvements in the human rights domain. During his visit, which included trips to the conflict-affected regions in the north, the Special Rapporteur met with various Government officials, including President Bozizé, who undertook to comply with international human rights obligations. The proposed establishment of the National Human Rights Commission and the recent decision by the Government to create a free hotline service for use by victims of human rights violations have also been welcomed as evidence of the Government's drive to help improve the country's human rights record.

43. Moreover, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court visited Bangui in February within the context of ongoing investigations into alleged human rights crimes committed in the Central African Republic from 2002 to 2003. On 24 May, the former Vice-President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jean-Pierre Bemba, was arrested in Brussels and charged in connection with those crimes.

44. Although commendable efforts have been made by the Government and the civil society organizations to promote gender equality and equity and to curb sexual and gender-based violence, much remains to be done to increase women's participation in the decision-making process and to reduce violence against women. In that regard, BONUCA has carried out five gender sensitization workshops in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and National Solidarity. The mission has also facilitated two training sessions for national police and women's organizations on the provisions of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and provided gender expertise during the organization of the national seminar on security sector reform in April 2008.

VII. Staff security

45. With the improvement of the overall security situation in the country, security phases in the prefectures of Sangha-Mbaéré, Ombella-Mpoko, Kémo and Mambéré-Kadéï were reduced from III to II, while those in the prefectures of Nana-Grébizi, Haute-Kotto, Basse-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou and Bamingui-Bangoran were reduced from IV to III. No major security threats or incidents involving United Nations staff members have been reported.

VIII. Observations

46. The overall political, security and socio-economic situation in the Central African Republic continues to be fragile, characterized by widespread poverty, insecurity and a disturbing cycle of human rights violations and impunity, which

victimizes innocent civilians and leaves those responsible within the defence and security forces, rebel movements and highway bandits, free to commit even more crimes. The Government's encouraging efforts to improve respect for human rights need to be intensified and made irreversible as a first step in curbing the culture of impunity and improving the quality of life for its people.

47. I welcome the recent conclusion of the proceedings of the Dialogue Preparatory Committee and the signing of a peace agreement between the Government and the APRD rebel movement as encouraging steps towards the convening, as soon as possible, of the inclusive political dialogue. The United Nations reaffirms its strong support for the dialogue process and, to that end, I renew my appeal to all armed groups to lay down their weapons and work towards the restoration of sustainable peace and stability, which would help create an auspicious environment for enhanced international cooperation with the Central African Republic to promote economic growth and prosperity.

48. The period under review has been challenging for humanitarian workers who suffered several attacks by armed groups and highway bandits. I strongly appeal to all parties to ensure unhindered access of humanitarian assistance to populations in need and to ensure adequate protection for humanitarian personnel. I commend humanitarian agencies and personnel for their dedicated and life-saving work, often under very challenging conditions.

49. I welcome the recent decision by member States of ECCAS to give the subregional force, FOMUC, greater regional authority in a manner that could strengthen its capability and bolster its operational effectiveness on the ground in the Central African Republic. I once again commend the African Union and the European Union for their important political and financial support for FOMUC, and appeal to them and to the international community as a whole for continued and increased support to enable FOMUC to expand its security assistance projects throughout the country.

50. In the same vein, I welcome the deployment in eastern Chad and north-eastern Central African Republic of the multinational European Union Force (EUFOR), under Security Council resolution 1778 (2007), to protect civilians, in particular refugees and displaced persons. I thank the authorities in the Central African Republic for cooperating closely with United Nations and European Union officials to facilitate the deployment and functioning of MINURCAT and EUFOR in the north-eastern part of the country.

51. Recent encouraging stabilization efforts can only be sustained through the demonstration of the requisite political will by all national stakeholders, with continued international support, to stay the course towards a sustained and irreversible peacebuilding process. The United Nations will continue to support all efforts made by the people of the Central African Republic to improve conditions in their own country, aware that the primary responsibility in that regard rests with the Central African Republic itself, if real progress is to be made. I therefore encourage the Central African authorities to intensify governance and economic reforms to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the management of public resources.

52. I urge the authorities to do more to strengthen respect for the rule of law through the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

and to deal decisively with impunity. As peace cannot be sustained without justice, I also call upon the international community to provide assistance to the Central African Republic in restoring its judicial sector.

53. I wish especially to commend the multidimensional support provided to the Central African Republic by regional States and organizations, despite the economic and financial pressures they face. I also welcome the continued support provided by the international financial institutions for vital reform initiatives and to promote development, and I appeal to them to remain engaged as the country embarks on long-term governance reforms, through the dialogue process.

54. Finally, I would like to commend my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, François Lonseny Fall, and his staff, as well as other members of the United Nations country team as a whole, for their commitment and dedication in fulfilling their duties, often under challenging conditions.